

Effects of Radioactive Fallout Still Appear Among Islanders

By Howard Simons
Washington Post Staff Writer

A significant number of Marshall Islanders are only now—11 years later—beginning to show thyroid gland damage after being accidentally drenched with radioactive fallout from an American H-bomb test in the Pacific.

The finding of latent damage, according to the government doctor in charge of treating the islanders for thyroid damage, means that atomic experts now must revise upwards their estimates of the hazard from short-lived radioactive debris. This is the kind of fallout, such as radioactive iodine, that occurs mostly near an atomic blast and gets into the human body through food and drink.

Moreover, said Dr. Robert Conrad in a telephone interview, there is some evidence that fallout damage to the thyroid gland might also be the cause of an observed stunting among some of the children exposed to the fallout.

Dr. Conrad is the leader of a medical survey team that commutes between Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island and Rongelap Island in the Marshalls. The team's most recent report to the Atomic Energy Commission is being circulated this week to members of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy. What this report shows is this:

Between March and October of this year 10 new cases

of thyroid abnormalities have been found among the 82 Rongelap natives who were exposed to fallout in the first week of March, 1954. This brings to 18 the total number of the 82 fallout-drenched natives who show thyroid gland abnormalities.

Most of the abnormalities are thought to be benign tumors. But at least one has turned out to be a cancer of the thyroid gland.

Significantly, in a control group of Rongelap natives who escaped the 1954 fallout—including some near relatives of those not as lucky—there had been no evidence of thyroid disease.

Six of the thyroid victims have undergone successful operations. Three, with benign tumors, underwent surgery at the U.S. Naval Hospital on Guam in 1964. Three other, two with benign tumors and one with a cancerous thyroid gland, underwent surgery at the Lahey Clinic in Boston in July of this year after tests at Brookhaven.

Dr. Conrad said he was hopeful that additional cases of thyroid tumors among the exposed natives can be averted through treatment with a synthetic thyroid hormone now being given to the Islanders. It is believed the hormone can arrest the development of the tumors and possibly even cause their regression.

The Brookhaven medical scientist also is anxious to learn whether the hormone

treatment will have any effect on the apparent link between radiation-damaged thyroids and the retarded growth seen among some of the exposed children.

In Dr. Conrad's view, the emphasis hitherto given to the immediate and external effects of radiation now must be balanced with a new appreciation for the latent, internal effects that can be caused by radioactive materials, such as radioiodine, that get into the body. Radioiodine selectively concentrates in the thyroid gland.

The Rongelap findings reported this week to the Joint Committee follow a U.S. Public Health Service report last week of a tenuous link between fallout in Utah and Arizona and the incidence of suspicious thyroid nodules or small lumps among children there.

The Utah report, actually a preliminary report of a superficial medical study, is drawing heavy criticism from other Government agencies. The critics point out that there was no real agreement among the non-thyroid experts who performed the physical examinations. There is virtually no data from other areas for judging the Utah-Arizona findings. And many of the children examined were born after most of the fallout fell.

The Rongelap report is being circulated, too, at a time when France is preparing an atmospheric test of an H-Bomb in the Pacific over the vigorous protests of islanders there.